

11.30.2007 - Troubles in Toyland

As temperatures drop, decorations go up, and the smells of Christmas cookies fill our homes, the signs are clear: the holidays are upon us. Unfortunately, this holiday season shoppers have more to worry about than finding that perfect gift or beating holiday traffic.

More than 25 million unsafe toys and children's products were recalled this year due to unsafe levels of toxic chemicals and safety hazards. It seems every week the headlines are filled with tales of another dangerous product imported from China and another urgent recall.

As a father and a grandfather, I share the concern of every parent when I read these headlines. No parent is expected to know whether the toy they just bought their child contains an unlisted ingredient or excessive levels of lead, nor should they be.

As a nation, our consumer safety net has completely unraveled. Take the recent voluntary recall of a toy called Aqua Dots, which contains a potentially toxic adhesive solvent that sent children in the United States and Australia to the hospital. In Australia, officials immediately ordered the hazardous toy off store shelves. Officials in the United States, however, were only able to issue a voluntary recall and left the incredible burden of protecting American children from millions of hazardous toys to their parents.

This is not the way we do things in West Virginia and it is not the way should be doing things in America. Our safety system is failing our children. We can and must do better.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), the federal agency responsible for toy and children's product safety, is the latest victim of President Bush's budgetary chopping block.

This year, the President's budget provided \$62 million to regulate an industry with annual sales of \$1.4

trillion. The CPSC's staff, nearly 1,000 in the 1970s, has been slashed to 420 workers, 12.5 percent fewer than in 2002. Only 34 employees are assigned in the entire country to test all consumer products, including toys. Just one worker has the job of dropping toys to see if they break into small pieces that could cause young children to choke.

Likewise, in the Los Angeles area, which sees 15 million truck-size containers pass through its ports each year, only one CPSC inspector works part-time to monitor incoming shipments for unsafe products made in foreign countries.

To make matters worse, the President's proposed budget for 2008 calls for more budget cuts that will reduce CPSC staff even further, from 420 to 401. It seems that the safety of our children's toys is such a low priority for President Bush that he has not even bothered to fill the long-standing vacancies on the commission. Three out of the five positions, including the chair, are currently unoccupied.

The 110th Congress is responding to these "Troubles in Toyland" with wide-ranging toy and child product safety legislation that hopes to be the most sweeping over-haul of the Consumer Product Safety Commission in decades. Once enacted, this legislation will ban lead from children's products and paint, require mandatory testing of children's products by a third-party, and fully fund the CPSC so it can protect American consumers of all ages and sizes.

This is a time for strong government oversight. As a nation, we have a responsibility to ensure that the products on our store shelves are always going to be safe. We owe it to our children to step up to that responsibility.

The CPSC has released its "ABC's of Toy Safety" to coincide with the start of the holiday shopping season. Consumers can get this report, as well as a full list of recalled toys and products, by going to the CPSC Web site <http://www.cpsc.gov/> or by calling toll-free 1-800-638-2772.

For all you Santas out there, before you start making your list, and checking it twice, make sure you read the latest toy recalls and product safety guidelines. Nothing is more important than the safety of our children, at the holidays and year round.

